Stephen King’s *Needful Things*: A Dystopian Vision of Capitalism during Its Triumph

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1. Introduction

“I thought that I’d written a satire of Reaganomics in America in the eighties. You know, people will buy anything and sell anything, even their souls. I always saw Leland Gaunt, the shop owner who buys souls, as the archetypal Ronald Reagan: charismatic, a little bit elderly, selling nothing but junk but it looks bright and shiny”. It is Stephen King himself to retrospectively identify (in Lehmann-Haupt and Rich 2006) his *Needful Things* (1991), the last horror novel of the “Castle Rock” trilogy (*The Dark Half*, “The Sun Dog” and *Needful Things* all take place in this imaginary town), as an entertaining criticism of the ideal of “market society” proclaimed by Ronald Reagan as early as 1981, in his inaugural address as 40th President of the United States. In his own website¹, King recalls that at the epoch, he “was one of the few people in the United States who thought the eighties were really funny. It was a decade in which people decided, for a while, at least, that greed was good and that hypocrisy was simply another tool for getting along”. The Eighties were “the final corruption of the Love and Peace Generation”, a decade when “everything had come with a price tag”. People will buy anything and sell anything, their own story included: the decade “quite literally was the sale of the century. The final items up on the block had been honor, integrity, self-respect, and innocence”.

*Needful Things*, as James Smythe (2014) perfectly summarizes it, is the story of how *die Kleine Stadt* of Castle Rock (*In Einer Kleinen Stadt* is the German title of *Needful Things*) reacts to the “knick-knack shop” opened by Gaunt, one “that sells one-off items, and – for the customers of the shop – they just so happen to be the exact thing that they’ve always wanted to buy”. Unexpectedly, they are extremely cheap, “well below they actual street value”, but Gaunt requires his customers to add some jokes, causing distress to other members of the Castle Rock community, to the small amount of money spent on buying each individual “needful”

thing. The accumulation of sales ends up with threatening the foundations of the community itself, every needful thing sold representing an incremental step towards destruction of social relationships. Now, that one of the most prolific and successful writers of our times explicitly experiment with the socio-economic and moral Zeitgeist of a highly peculiar decade of recent United States history is not in itself sufficient reason for sociologists and economists to devote attention to Needful Things. At the same time, King’s decision “to turn the eighties into a small-town curio shop called Needful Things and see what happened” provides an important opportunity to explore the actual and possible evolution of consumer behavior after we had come, as Sassatelli (2017) writes, to consider ourselves as consumers in a consumer society – a process wherein “Reaganomics” appear as milestone. The “Reaganomics” that is the object of King’s satire is not only, and not so much, the supply-side, revolution in economic policy announced by the Reagan administration in 1981 (see Blanchard 1987), but also, and mainly, the socio-political philosophy of Reagan’s “conservative capitalism”, substituting “the market for government as the key institution of the society” (Hoover 1987, 245). Needful Things is a visionary, dystopian scenario of capitalism during its triumph (if we are to borrow from the subtitle of Albert O. Hirschman’s The Passions and the Interests, of 1977), and at the same time a vivid illustration of the perilous tensions between ideals of self-realization (via market logics and consumption) and social relationships that a consumer society is bound to engender.

The paper is structured around two main issues at stake, i.e. the evolution of consumption in a consumer society, and the tensions between this latter, on one side, and social relationships on the other. Section 2 introduces readers to Needful Things as a “satire of Reaganomics”. The section is based on drawing a parallel between the traits of the American society as desired and (partly) shaped by the Reagan presidency and those that stems from the little community of Castle Rock. Section 3 illustrates “the economics of Needful Things”: it shows how King’s novel can help drive the attention to the multiple factors driving consumption besides concerns in respect of budget-price harmony and the benefit that would arise from the goods. Both “deeds” demanded by Gaunt and their outcome, that customers cannot estimate a priori, are here considered (with a specific focus on the psychological “ownership drive”, which has been investigated in experimental studies in behavioural economics) as a vivid illustration of the complexity and multidimensionality of cognitive mechanisms involved in consumption decisions. With a focus on the four main elements of the market society as portrayed in
*Needful Things*, i.e. seller, commodities, buyers and bargaining, Section 4 helps retracing in the sociological literature the main lines of the evolution that brought us towards forms of consumer societies wherein consumers constitute their own identity through the symbolic world of consumption. Gaunt’s decommodified, personal and rather radically idiosyncratic “needful things” appear thus to represent the individuality of consumption at its extreme, a paradoxical form of mandatory individuality whereby such apparently “freeing” things, helping consumers to satisfy their profound (and unfulfilled) needs, become “needful”. The pattern of addiction into which consumers fall reveals the falseness of the premises on which their consumption rests. Then, in Section 5, we enlarge the perspective to take into account the social dimension. As Russell (1996; 135) notes, King uses “Gaunt and his store to test the rules of the society”. We here use insights from economic anthropology, and in particular from the debate triggered by Marcel Mauss’ *The Gift* (1925) on the political and moral foundations of human societies, to interpret the curious end of “needful things”’ life cycle. Goods sold by Gaunt finally prove to be junk, while the seller reveals himself as an arms dealer: the end of civilization in King’s dystopia perfectly symbolizes the final disruption of social relationship produced by the mandatory individuality of consumer societies. In the end, by means of a multidisciplinary analysis that combines economics, sociology, and anthropology, we conclude that the abstract world of fiction springing out of imagination can be significantly more realistic than the abstract world painted by science.

2. **On *Needful Things* as a “satire of Reaganomics”**

“Leland Gaunt opens a new shop in Castle Rock called Needful Things. Anyone who enters his store finds the object of his or her lifelong dreams and desires: a prized baseball card, a healing amulet. In addition to a token payment, Gaunt requests that each person perform a little “deed,” usually a seemingly innocent prank played on someone else from town. These practical jokes cascade out of control and soon the entire town is doing battle with itself. Only Sheriff Alan Pangborn suspects that Gaunt is behind the population’s increasingly violent behavior”. Here is, in a nutshell, the plot of *Needful Things*, taken from the synopsis of the book appearing on King’s website². The flap adds useful remarks: “With a demonic blend of

malice and affection, Stephen King says goodbye to the town he put on the map – Castle Rock, Maine ... where Polly Chalmers runs You Sew and Sew and Sheriff Alan Pangborn is in charge of keeping the peace. It's a small town, and Stephen King fans might think they know its secrets pretty well; they've been here before. Leland Gaunt is a stranger – and he calls his shop Needful Things. Eleven-year-old Brain Rusk is his first customer, and Brian finds just what he wants most in all the world; a '56 Sandy Koufax baseball card. By the end of the week, Mr. Gaunt's business is fairly booming, and why not? At Needful Things, there's something for everyone. And, of course, there is always a price. For Leland Gaunt, the pleasure of doing business lies chiefly in seeing how much people will pay for their most secret dreams and desires. And as Leland Gaunt always points out, at Needful Things, the prices are high indeed.

Does that stop people from buying? Has it ever? For Alan and Polly, this one week in autumn will be an awful test – a test of will, desire, and pain. Above all, it will be a test of their ability to grasp the true nature of their enemy. They may have a chance... But maybe not, because, as Mr. Gaunt knows, almost everything is for sale: love, hope, even the human soul. With the potent storytelling authority that millions of readers have come to prize, Stephen King delivers an Out Town with a vengeance, an inimitable farewell to a place his fiction has often and long called home”.

Everything is for sale, even the human soul: this is the first, surface meaning of Needful Things: a satire of “Reaganomics”. Reaganomics was “a major shift to conservative economic policies” (Blanchard 1987, 15), its four main pillars being “a supply-side revolution, a scaling down of wasteful government activity, lower taxes and less interference with the market economy” (ibid.). Reagan was elected upon the promise to the Americans that he would organize a proper counter-offensive against inflation, which “distorts our economic decisions, penalizes thrift, and crushes the struggling youth and the fixed-income elderly alike” (Reagan 1981). One against taxes, which “penalize successful achievements and keep us from maintaining full productivity” (ibid.); one against unnecessary public spending, which “mortgage our future and our children’s future for the temporary convenience of the present” (ibid.). Reagan invoked a revolution against the “state” (“government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem”, as he famously cried in the inaugural address of his presidency, Reagan 1981). But the leading actor of the revolution itself is not the “society” of Pierre Clastres’ (19787[1974]) classic studies in the anthropology of tribal groups, tribal societies refusing the state apparatus to protect themselves against economic expropriation and political coercion.
Rather, the revolution comes from the “no society” American nation of individuals who aspire to regain their lost destiny. In truth, they are compelled to do so, in that peculiar Zeitgeist: as Margaret Thatcher will declare in 1987, in talking to Woman's Own magazine, “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It’s our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There’s no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation” (reported in Brooker 2010, 10).

Thatcher’s famous dictum may have been variously misrepresented, as English journalist and author Samuel Brittan (the brother of former European Commissioner for Competition Leon Brittan) has repeatedly noted (see Brittan 1996). But even in this case, Reagan’s inaugural address leaves no doubt: the only use of the term “society” (“individual” and “nation” recur five times each) is in drawing the parallel between the nation and the individual, that would face the same limitations in borrowing and avoiding living beyond their means. “From time to time we’ve been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden. The solutions we seek must be equitable, with no one group singled out to pay a higher price”. Individuals must be capable of governing themselves, and the emphasis is on “special interest groups” made up of “professionals, industrialists, shopkeepers, clerks, cabbies, and truck drivers”; in short, “We the people’, this breed called Americans”.

Reagan’s was, indeed, a revolution, also in political economy, spurred by a combination of crisis, ideological zeal, and “grand opportunities” (see Jacob 1985, 8). The practical aspects of the revolution were perfectly in line with its ideological underpinnings: “Reagan adheres to a loosely structured personal value scheme which is grounded in a generally conservative twist applied to traditional, middle American, middle class social precepts. This mélange of attitudes includes, but is not limited to, ideals of individualism, the efficacy of the effort, the supremacy of private social arrangements over governmental regulation, and of private, unfettered economic enterprise. Importantly, the view assumes that social and economic rewards should be distributed in accord with the energy and effectiveness of individualistic
enterprises” (ibid., 10). The retreat of the state is perfectly justified, in this conception: state activities should be directed towards the promotion and enhancement of “the appetites and energies of economic man”, by deregulation and tax reform, which would free the instinct, and provide incentives, to invest.

Not surprisingly, the Reagan did much to radicalize the communitarian critique of liberalism in the Nineties (see Bell 2016). “Far from producing beneficial communal consequences, the invisible hand of unregulated free-market capitalism undermines the family (e.g., few corporations provide enough leave to parents of newborn children), disrupts local communities (e.g., following plant closings or the shifting of corporate headquarters), and corrupts the political process (e.g., US politicians are often dependent on economic interest groups for their political survival, with the consequence that they no longer represent the community at large). Moreover, the valorization of greed in the Thatcher/Reagan era justified the extension of instrumental considerations governing relationships in the marketplace into spheres previously informed by a sense of uncalculated reciprocity and civil obligation” (ibid.). The erosion of social responsibilities and communal life is in other terms the result of a political philosophy that exalts the market as allocator of values and, in strong opposition to liberal capitalism, does not assign to the State the power to allow the disadvantaged, by program and regulations, to compete.

Reagan’s “conservative capitalism” (Hoover 1987) is a blend of libertarian (the government as guarantor of individual freedom to choose, in a Friedmannian-Hayekian way) and traditionalist (the government as guarantor of the institutional structure of the society, which presupposes and somehow paradoxically defends, while providing support, social inequalities) perspectives. Michael Novak’s (1991) defense of the “growth through incentives” policy implemented by the Reagan administration provides a shining illustration of this mixture. Novak shows that Reagan achieved significantly better results than Carter in terms of the “misery index”, that his policies had little to do with the widening income gap between rich and poor, and that welfare benefits cut were more than compensated by tax cuts (as Reagan expected). These latter should spur economic growth and produce, as a result, higher tax revenues from the rich. Reagan’s presidency erected greed as positive idol: “shame is banished, greed enshrined, and the political supremacy of private wealth celebrated as frankly as it was in the Gilded Age”, wrote New Republic (reported in Gillon 1995, 302). While liberals consider
individuals as capable of ameliorating the human condition, “the conservative sees a spiritual, fallible, limited, semirational personality whose behavior cannot be improved by reason alone” (Hoover 1987, 247). This implies that the main role of the State is not, contrary to the liberal perspective, to ensure equality of opportunity, but rather “to provide the appropriate environment for the nurturance of the particular strengths of each personality” (ibid.).

It has now become commonplace to define this vision as “neoliberal”. It should be noted is that neoliberalism is more than an economic ideology, shaping public policies towards competitiveness as main or unique target, and promoting market as the allocator of values, to be protected from political interference. Social relationships are affected as well, and heavily so. “The political thinkers most admired by Thatcher and Reagan helped shape the ideal of society as a kind of universal market (and not, for example, a polis, a civil sphere or a kind of family) and of human beings as profit-and-loss calculators (and not bearers of grace, or of inalienable rights and duties)” (Metcalf 2017). Neoliberalism considers competition “as the defining characteristic of human relations” (Monbiot 2016): it is “a way of reordering social reality, and of rethinking our status as individuals” (Metcalf 2017). As Metcalf puts it, “Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ had already given us the modern conception of the market: as an autonomous sphere of human activity and therefore, potentially, a valid object of scientific knowledge. But Smith was, until the end of his life, an 18th-century moralist. He thought the market could be justified only in light of individual virtue, and he was anxious that a society governed by nothing but transactional self-interest was no society at all. Neoliberalism is Adam Smith without the anxiety”. Or, perhaps, it is the non-natural, historical evolution of Karl Polanyi’s “market society”, which he defined as a historically given social organization (the set of social institutions and political constraints that individuals take as “context” for their behavior) wherein price-making markets (exchange) are the dominant, or unique specific institution socially organizing the economy. The economy tends to become more and more autonomous from the society, which – with respect to earlier, non-market societies – is run “as an adjunct to the market. Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system” (Polanyi 1944, 60).

Now, Needful Things has been mostly considered, not without reasons, as a critique of “American consumerism and greed” (Wiater et al. 2006, 166). Yet, there is more in it, as many have recognized. Anderson (2017, 135) is right in noting that “the fact that the book was not
seen as a satire only shows how accurately the book did define its era”. Still, the argument rests on essentially moral bases – “King saw Reaganomics as a symptom of a defective society where people cared only about their own wants and needs and not about the greater good” – whereas a more complete picture is needed. Nor can we content ourselves with detecting in the book King’s explorations in a “familiar theme”, however developed in new ways, “the relationship between the individual and the community” (Russell 1996, 134). Rather, the extra-literary power of King’s novel seems to lie in the connections that link together these various arguments.

For, as Wiater et al. (2006, 166) note, *Needful Things* is remindful of various other novels and short stories, like for instance *Salem’s Lot*, of 1976, and *The Storm of the Century*, 1999, by King himself, but one could add the recent fantasy drama series *The Booth at the End*, of 2010, and the 2017 Italian movie *The Place*, by Paolo Genovese. “A stranger comes to town, wreaking havoc for his own evil purposes” (Wiater et al. 2006, 166), or in any case proposing a Faustian pact to individuals who end up, in a typical game of free will and determinism, with destroying their relationships with other members of the community they live in. What clearly makes *Needful Things* unique in King’s writings, and differentiates it from, for instance, Richard Matheson’s short novel “The Distributor” (whose plot is otherwise truly similar to the one of *Needful Things*) is however, and exactly, an emphasis on the economic dimension. This latter seems to logically precede (and somehow create), in *Needful Things*, the moral atmosphere that generally prevails in these other novels.

Matheson pictures “The Distributor” as the “story of an evil that wasn’t going to be identified. The evil was going to be approached in such a banal everyday way. Nothing supernatural or mysterious about it. The protagonist just methodically demolishing the neighborhood” (in Simmons 2004). The “Distributor” has no human traits – he has no traits at all, in truth. In *Needful Things*, “King deliberately keeps us in the dark” (Russell 1996, 130) about Gaunt. “Absolute evil”, he is a “supernatural creation who looks human but does not share many human traits … [in the novel], he never really exists as a person” (ibid.). And yet he represents Reagan, King writes in revealing the satirical character of *Needful Things*: “the archetypal Ronald Reagan”, “charismatic, a little bit elderly, selling nothing but junk but it looks bright and shiny”. In short, Gaunt has not only a precise function, like the Distributor, but a nature, however supernatural and symbolical, which suggests that the methodic demolition of the
Castle Rock community may be more than a self-imposing end in itself. The peculiar character of the Faustian pact that Gaunt proposes to the people in Castle Rock, the somehow systemic features of the pact itself, and perhaps even the ironic parallel between the little “deeds” that Gaunt requests when selling his things and the “great deeds” that the Americans, in Reagan’s inaugural address, are said to be able to perform, require further investigation. The following two sections will therefore focus, respectively, on the economic and sociological dimension of the needful things bought by customers of Needful Things.

3. The (micro)economics of “needful things”

Consumption behaviour has attracted many authors, who have treated it in their novels in different fictive universes and contexts. While economists doing experimental studies investigate the consumption decisions of the subjects involved in the fictive scenario of the experiment, novel authors do the same in the fictive worlds they paint in their novels. As the characters in a novel spring out of the fantasy of the author, they can have no free-will, but, based on the observation skills of the author, various realities we can encounter in everyday life are represented in the fictive world they live in. Fiction corresponds to the “mental experiment” [Gedankenexperiment] which is accepted as a scientific method in physics and social sciences. In the novel, the most determinant common drive in the attitudes of the consumers is the blind desire they have for the objects which they see in the store, a desire that urge them no matter what the cost might be. Cora Rusk, for example, goes to the house of Myra, whom she regards as a rival with respect to possessing the picture of Elvis Presley. Just because Myra also has the picture, she even ventures to kill her:

“Cora opened the door of Chuck and Myra’s bedroom and saw exactly what she had expected: the bitch lying naked in a rumpled double bed which looked as if it had seen a hard tour of duty lately. One of her hands was behind her, tucked under the pillows. The other held a framed picture... Her eyes were half-closed in ecstasy... Horrified jealousy flared in Cora’s heart and rose up her throat until she could taste in bitter juice in her mouth” (King 1991, 21, 13).

If we handle the interest that consumers have in the exchange of goods in the store of Needful Things by the felicific calculus analysis developed by Bentham, the guilt or the amount of pain the consumers feel when they come to know of the results of the jokes is subtracted from the
quantity of the pleasure arising from the ownership over an object. Since, in the first instance, jokes are much easier to realize, pleasure would stand out more than pain. After, however, the murders in consequence of the jokes come into the light, it is seen that it is nothing of the sort. At that point, there is neither pleasure nor pain; then it is only about death and about extinction. Not being able to figure them out, the individual is not aware of the degree or intensity of the pleasure and pain that might result from the action. S/he does not know that the damage arising from the good to be bought would be greater than the benefit it would bring about. Sometimes, however, s/he miscalculates even in cases where s/he is aware of it. Hence, the attitudes of these novel figures do, in no way, match up with any of the different rationality notions attributed to the economic individual.

In fact, the customers meet the minimum functions to acquire the possession of an object both from the point of view of financial and behavioural patterns. In this bizarre system of values and exchange behaviour, the only component that might have some meaning for economists is “the behaviour driven by possessiveness”. Put more clearly, since the inhabitants of the township wrongly assess whether the exchange would bring them a benefit or a loss, the only urge which guides them is “the drive to possess an object”. As a phenomenon that also applies to real life, this set of circumstances first attracted behavioural economists rather than those involved in mainstream economics.

Behavioural economics is an approach that reviews the untested dynamic hypotheses which the mainstream theory of economics brings forth. The full rational behaviour of economic actors corresponds to the acceptance of market price as the value measurement. As, however, Johnson, Keinan ve Häubl'in (2007) have shown, apart from the value measurement created in the relationship between buyers and sellers, there are also other values created by individuals on the basis of their queries and memories. Research performed in the field of behavioural economics investigates these sets of circumstances by means of different tests. The sets of circumstances in question lead to the exchange behaviour whereby different values do come to the forefront, which can also include endowment-like effects without ownership. This phenomenon observed in experiments paved the way for the development of the theory of exchange asymmetry.

The circumstance where an individual values something s/he already owns more than something else that s/he does not own is defined as endowment effect in the psychology and
behavioural economics and as divesture aversion or the mere ownership effect in social psychology. “Endowment effect” and “ownership effect” were first defined by R. Thaler (1980) according to whom a product’s opportunity cost is determined lower than its normal price, and individuals have difficulty in taking decisions after they have taken a product in their possession. Evaluating the price of a good higher than its normal price is also considered under the context of this effect. “Ownership effect” which Kahneman and Tversky’nin (2000) investigated in their studies enables us to review our views about rational decision-makers and to imagine the benefits that may arise from the cooperation between the disciplines of economics and psychology.

Thaler (1980) is of the opinion that a good seems to be more valuable to its current owner than to its potential owner. The effect manifests itself in two forms: First, to continue to keep an object people pay a higher price than the one that they pay when they buy it. Besides, it does not matter for the validity of this valuation paradigm whether they have a special dependence on that object or whether they have acquired it only a short while ago. The other effect, on the other hand, represents the exchange paradigm. Observations in tests have revealed that people are unwilling to exchange a good they own with another one with the same value.

The most prominent study that investigated this effect is the one performed by Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler (1990, 1991). In their study they used a coffee mug. In a study carried out by Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler (1990), they gave a coffee mug to the participants and asked them exchange it with pens with the same value. The owners of the coffee mugs estimated a price twice as high as their normal price and asked a price twice as much for a mug to be given in exchange for a pen. In another experiment the participants were endowed with a bar of Swiss chocolate and asked to exchange it for a coffee mug. They now had the Swiss chocolate, and they were not willing to give it up for a coffee mug. In case where they had coffee mugs, this time they were unwilling to exchange it for a bar of Swiss chocolate, in fact the object which they were unwilling to give a moment ago. The result here is that someone who owns a good attributes to it a higher value than other persons who do not, even when s/he has randomly acquired it (Johnson, Keinan and Häubl, 2007, 461). This phenomenon is handled in the behavioural model called as “agreeing to accept or to pay”, a model that investigates to what extent consumers or people can endure pain or they are ready to take the risk of losing
something to be able to acquire or gain something (Beggan, 1992; Roeckelein, 2006; Morewedge and Giblin, 2015)

Some researchers define the reason of the attribution of a different value to the same good when buying and selling it as “loss aversion”. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) and Tversky and Kahneman (1991) argue that a feeling of loss emerges if we have to give up something we own; on the other hand, a feeling of self-sacrifice comes over us if we do not ponder over the opportunity to buy something we do not own. In other words, we feel the pain of loss more acutely than we feel the pain of the non-ownership. This pain also comes into play during the acts of selling and buying.

“Ownership effect” is not investigated in the concept of gains and losses developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), because here probabilities of both gains and losses are uncertain. Previous research investigating “loss aversion” has revealed that the pain arising from the loss of an object is more acute than the pain arising from non-ownership (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Tversky and Kahneman 1991). The effect of loss is stronger than that of gain. The difference between the sale and purchase prices reflects this pain (Carmon and Ariely, 2000, 361). Biased and misleading information are considerably determinant on “ownership effect”. The presentation form of a good has an effect on the decision which drives the person to own it or to buy it for a reasonable price (Morewedge and Giblin, 2015). The arguments which Morewedge, Shu, Gilbert and Wilson (2009) and Maddux et al. (2010) have brought forward in their studies in respect of attachment indicate that attachment or association with the self-induced by owning a good or self-associations reflect the unwillingness of individuals to trade. The emotional attachment established with a good corresponds to a loss in the self when the good is lost or handed over to another person. Here the financial return that would arise from the sale of that good loses its meaning, just because the object has already become a part within the identity of the individual (Beggan, 1992). We can instance, in this respect, an adult who can never give up a t-shirt with the emblem of the university from which s/he graduated.
4. Why things are “needful”: Needful Things as a consumer society

As mentioned above, part of the interest lying in Needful Things originates from King’s orientation to provide a satire of the American society in the Eighties focused not only on a generic tendency to individualism – and on its growing political legitimacy; the “American society”, King (1981, 316) wrote in Danse Macabre, of 1981 (the year Reagan took office), “has become more and more entranced by the cult of me-ism” – or on the endangered individual-community nexus. Rather, the author succeeds in putting the primacy of consumption in the foreground, deepening the complex intertwining between personal intimate needs, symbolic meaning embedded in goods, and market-mediated social relationships. In this sense, King’s novel constitutes a vivid representation of the so-called consumer society and of the social and human dynamics supporting it.

Consumer culture is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon, concerning practices, discourses, and institutions, as the sociological debate on this topic has shown. Nevertheless, despite the partial approach evidently due to its novel nature, Needful Things succeeds in addressing and problematizing one of the main issues associated with contemporary Western societies: the relationship between people and objects. Although this relationship is not specific to the current contexts, since objects are material and symbolic landmarks in traditional societies as well, contemporary Western countries stand out for a primacy of commodities’ possession as the way to satisfy daily needs (Weber 1923, cited in Sassatelli 2007). In addition to this, some scholars highlight that the strong integration between production, consumption, and exchange existing in traditional contexts is disentangled in the present time. As a consequence, consumption appears now as a completely autonomous sphere, separated from consumer’s daily experience, to the point where the potential buyer is surrounded by objects that he or she can perceive as meaningless. Thus consumer society is essentially an articulated system aimed at “constructing meanings around products to make them ‘consumable’, (i.e. significant for the consumer) by placing them within his or her structure of needs” (Sassatelli 2007, 4). The definition directly refers to classic authors like Simmel, who shifts the focus from the object to the subject in consumption practices, stating that the value of a good depends on the subjective judgement made by the potential buyer rather than on the product’s intrinsic characteristics (Simmel 1990); and Baudrillard, according to whom the value of the good is tightly intertwined with the meaning attributed
to it (Baudrillard 1981). Baudrillard also points out that in order to understand how the consumer society works, it is not enough to dwell on the relationship between the individual and the single object. Even if the single consumption act is apparently aimed at satisfying a specific need, the fulfilment can indeed take place only if objects are included in an articulated system of signs able of responding to the individuals’ needs (Baudrillard 1998).

Other scholars have stressed the active role of the subjects in this ongoing process of meaning construction related to consumption, underlining how individuals can use the consumer practices to affirm their own individuality and position themselves in a particular socio-cultural location, concurrently contributing to reproduce the social order they are part of (cf. Bourdieu 1984; Douglas and Isherwood 1979). This process of meaning attribution can concretely take shape through individualist consumption rituals, having some form of appropriation of the objects as the ultimate goal (McCracken 1988). Consumption can, therefore, be conceived as a set of practices engaging the consumer in a continuous game of appropriation of goods that, through rituals of attribution of meaning, assume a subjective value and are thus subtracted – together with their buyers – to standardization and impersonality, becoming identity goods. This relentless process is necessary for the subjects to maintain some degrees of freedom in a commodified social sphere that otherwise risks to overthrow them. But, as Sassatelli (2007) notes, in a consumer society the relation between freedom and oppression, from the point of view of the consumer, is extremely complicated. The need for a symbolic appropriation of goods, in order to de-commodify them, risks in fact to commodify the subjects themselves, since they can become incapable of affirming their own individuality regardless of the consumption process. In other words, it is desirable that the consumer, in interpreting his role as a social actor, finds a balance between indifference to commodities and an excessive personalization, attributing to the object the power to fulfil deep and completely individualistic needs (Ibid., 149). Otherwise, the freedom of consumption risks to turn into a slavery from consumption.

Some peculiar traits of the consumer society depicted here can be specifically focused through the analysis of four main elements as portrayed in Needful Things, i.e. seller, commodities, buyers and bargaining, as described below.

As already mentioned, the shop proprietor is defined in King’s novel in quite vague terms, without providing the reader with a detailed description. Through the words of the author,
we simply know that Leland Gaunt is a tall man, quite old, with long hands and a very kind face. These few strokes are enough to King to outline a man who appears affable and charming at first sight, a man to whom many women – and men – in Castle Rock feel pleasantly attracted. Gaunt has indeed an infectious smile arousing in the people he meets an “instant liking” (King 1991, 1, 3) or in some cases, a strong sense of familiarity:

_I know him, was the first clear thought to come through that unexpected cloud. I’ve met this man before. Where? She hadn’t, though, and that knowledge – that surety – came a moment later. It was déjà vu, she supposed (Ibid., 3, 2)._  

Within that framework, there is just one element appearing incongruent: the physical contact with this charming seller is for all those who meet him unpleasant and for some even terrifying, to such an extent that, after a first experience, everyone tries to escape the man’s grip. This detail is probably the only reference to Gaunt’s Luciferian nature, along with his yellow crooked teeth sometimes bared in a dog-like grin. If _get their own hands_ on the shop owner is indeed a disquieting experience that in some ways refers to its supernatural origin, in every other aspect he emanates a sense of comfort and familiarity. This feeling is amplified and narratively expressed by Gaunt’s gorgeous eyes, which each visitor perceives of a different colour – green or grey, hazel or blue –, usually with exactly the same shade as someone beloved or desired. The seller’s eyes, in other words, constitute the narrative expedient used by King to plastically introduce Gaunt’s main feature: that of being the empty screen on which potential buyers can project themselves and their desires to find fulfilment, proclaiming their own individuality. So, if the shop owner seems able to read visitors’ mind, it is because he is not a _full_ character: he is rather _empty_, allowing each visitor to fill him with their own need and desire. And for this same reason, perhaps, King is lacking in Gaunt’s description: what is necessary to understand about the seller is in fact linked to his merchandise, to his conception of trade and, starting from this, to the bargaining that he starts with buyers, that is to say the relationship temporarily established and oriented to the definition of the price, as we will see later. Gaunt himself, in describing his business, declares: “a little of everything, that’s what a successful business is all about (…). Diversity, pleasure, amazement, fulfilment…” _(Ibid., 1, 5)._  

The assortment of goods offered in the shop is in fact wildly varied, both in terms of type and value, with goods that are apparently worth a few dollars – if not entirely devoid of market value – side by side with undoubtedly precious objects. Just to mention some of them, “a silver
setting, a painting, a lovely triptych” (Ibid., 2, 5), a common “picture of Elvis, which looked to her like the sort of thing that would retail on any carnival midway in America for $4.99”, “a singularly uninteresting American eagle weathervane”, “a carnival glass lampshade which was certainly worth eight hundred dollars and might be worth as much as five thousand” (Ibid., 2, 3) are exhibited. The merchandise displayed in Gaunt’s shop – or, more often, the goods that the seller recovers from the backroom, declaring to have just received an object that "could be very interesting" for the visitor – has one thing in common: it is needful, a characteristic that can only be understood by placing oneself from the buyers’ point of view:

Perhaps all the really special things I sell aren’t what they appear to be. Perhaps they are actually gray things with only one remarkable property – the ability to take the shapes of those things which haunt the dreams of men and women (Ibid., 13, 9).

In other words, they are identity goods, perfectly responding to the expectations and deep desires of the buyers, even when they are not aware of it. In the shop, each visitor finds a specifically tailored good that is the answer to the question that Gaunt explicitly asks the 11-year-old Brian Rusk, his first customer: “what do you want more than anything else in the world at this moment?” (Ibid., 1, 4). In this sense, buyers are presented according to a narrative scheme which is similar to the one already mentioned for the shop owner: with a few exceptions, corresponding to the main characters of the book, customers are in fact defined exclusively on the basis of their desire and/or their need (see Russell 1996). They are, therefore, a mirror-image of Gaunt, namely they are characters shaped by a void, with an unfulfilled desire that gives form to their biography and defines - in a positive or negative way - their personal trajectory. However, buyers are not always aware of the depth of their desire: in some cases, in fact, they completely ignore their existence. If young Brian answers without hesitation to the question asked by Gaunt, saying that what he wants is the collectable baseball card of Sandy Koufax, other buyers recognize "their" needful thing only when they find it before their eyes, realizing at that moment how much is subjectively worth:

Suddenly Hugh looked like (...) a little boy who has just seen what he wants for Christmas: what he must have for Christmas, because all at once nothing else on God’s green earth would do (Ibid., 3, 6)

while others are initially only vaguely interested in a good and later, during the bargaining, they realize they are looking at something that fully reflects their needs:
She had originally seen the Lalique vase as something only mildly interesting, (...) Now she looked at it more closely and saw that it really was a nice piece of work, one which would look right at home in her living room. The border of flowers around the long neck of the vase was the exact color of her wallpaper. (...) She hadn’t realized that she wanted the vase as badly as she now felt she did (Ibid., 2, 5).

Each good purchased at Needful Things is indeed transformed from an anonymous and standardized object into an identity good, thanks to the process of meaning attribution carried out by the buyers. In other terms, the merchandise becomes “consumable”, evoking strong emotions and profoundly connecting with the consumer’s structure of needs deriving from the personal biography of each consumer, “like food to the starving, rest to the weary... quinine to the malarial” (Ibid., 9, 6). Gaunt himself states indeed that what he “really sell(s) is happiness” (Ibid., 4, 2). In this regard, the case of Hugh Priest, an employee of the Public Works Department with serious problems of alcoholism, is emblematic. When Priest walks casually by the store and sees a fox-tail inside the display case, he suddenly relives the good old days, back when he was a young newly licensed going around with his friends, driving his dad’s convertible whose radio antenna was hanging a “long, luxuriant fox-tail” (Ibid., 3, 6). This is for Hugh the vivid memory of “the best hour of the best day of his life”, “one of the last days before the booze him into had caught him firmly in its rubbery, pliant grip” (Ibid., 3, 6). To become the owner of the fox-tail means then to be able to relive that moment, but it is also more than that: the good has in it a promise of change, the hope of being able to get his life back on track, ideally re-starting the course of events that the alcohol addiction has shattered:

*He suddenly thought: I could change. This idea had its own arresting clarity. I could start over. Were such things possible? Yes, I think sometimes they are. I could buy that fox-tail and tie it on the antenna of my Buick. (...) Buy that fox-tail, tie it to the antenna, and drive. Drive where? Well, how about that Thursday-night A.A. meeting over in Greens Park for a start. (...) In that moment, as he stood looking at the fox-tail in the display window of Needful Things, Hugh could see a future. For the first time in years he could see a future (Ibid., 3, 6).*

But the good purchased, which appears to all intents and purposes as an identity good, soon betrays its promise of freedom. On the one hand, the possession of the badly desired object entails a deep gratification, but on the other hand, the excessive personalization related to a suffocating process of meaning attribution brings with it a closure, a withdrawal to a private
use, which leads to the unwillingness – or to the impossibility – to share it even with the loved ones:

He found himself in a strange and uncomfortable position. He had come by a great thing and could not show or share it. This should have vitiated his pleasure in his new acquisition, and it did, to some extent, but it also afforded him a furtive, niggardly satisfaction (Ibid., 3, 9).

It was undoubtedly a sin not to share them. But she had been surprised (and a little dismayed) by the feeling of jealous possessiveness which rose up in her each time she thought of showing Lester the splinter and inviting him to hold it. No! An angry, childish voice had cried out the first time she had considered this. No, it's mine! It wouldn't mean as much to him as it does to me! It couldn't! (Ibid., 13, 3).

This greed is also soon associated with the fear of losing the item: a loss representing the defeat of one's new self that has been gained – or regained – through the purchase process. Given this condition, buyers start looking at everyone with suspicion and fearing that their good can be stolen, sure of the other people's envy for their well-being and happiness. The unbearable idea of loss leads therefore to social exclusion. Being separated from your needful thing, while you are at work or on social occasions, becomes a great source of stress, which one is increasingly trying to avoid. This stress is countered by the security of possession, obviously involving very high costs:

It was good when you had something you really wanted and needed, but it was even better when that thing was safe. That was the best of all. Then the smile faded a little. Is that what you bought it for? To keep it on a high shelf behind a locked door? (Ibid., 5, 2)

Actually, the good promising to set you free – from disappointments, from pain, from the mistakes you have made – makes you a slave. Possession turns into obsession, preventing the sharing and condemning to a self-referential escalation. The process of meaning attribution and individualistic consumption, here pushed to the limits, has as its first endpoint the passive destruction of social ties, determined by an inward-looking tendency. The second endpoint, directly consequent, is the active destruction of social ties, which in this novel constitutes the most important part of the price to pay to get hold of one's own needful thing.

All the merchandise displayed in Gaunt's shop “whether trash or treasure, had one thing in common (…): there were no price-tags on any of them” (Ibid., 2, 3). Since we are dealing with identity goods, whose value is subjective, the price definition as well takes place through a
totally subjective process, apart from the common market rules. Gaunt defines it “a little eccentricity” and jokes about having been “a Middle Eastern rug merchant in (his) last incarnation” because, in his opinion, “a sale worth making is worth dickering over a little” (Ibid., 2, 4). Concretely, Gaunt’s merchandise has what he calls “a very special price” (Ibid., 1, 4), which consists of two different parts: “half... and half. One half is cash. The other is a deed” (Ibid., 1, 6). According to the vendor, this two-part price “would depend on the buyer. What the buyer would be willing to pay” (Ibid., 1, 11). With regard to the cash, the items usually have a moderate price, which is easily affordable for the buyers. It ranges from a few cents to some tens of dollars, which are usually all the money that the would-be purchasers have in their pocket: the monetary price set by the vendor is indeed completely detached from the value of goods, and simply corresponds to the buyer’s ability to pay at that precise moment. But it is the second half of the price to be more interesting from our point of view, the one defined “a deed” by Gaunt. It is on that half, in fact, that it is possible to estimate how much a buyer is willing to pay since, the vendor states, “the world is full of needy people who don't understand that everything, everything, is for sale... if you're willing to pay the price” and who believe that “all the answers are in their wallets” (Ibid., 3, 7). The deed required as part of the payment can be of different nature: while it is always presented by Gaunt as a small matter, it can actually vary from apparently innocent assignments (delivering a parcel, leave a sealed envelope in someone’s car) to more or less serious acts of vandalism (dirty the sheets hung out in the sun to dry, throw stones at the windows of a house, cut the ties of a car), up to real violent actions, like killing a neighbour’s dog. Despite these differences, all buyers accept the terms of the agreement, whatever they are. This is a peculiar kind of “free trade” (Ibid., 4, 9), as defined by Gaunt, where pricing is deeply affected by the availability of the purchasers to pay any amount, not only by cash, in order to grab the desired good: “Whatever deal they had made, this was worth it. A(n item) like this was worth practically anything” (Ibid., 1, 8). Since consumption assumes the main – or unique – role of self-expression, giving up possession becomes impossible, while the subjective value of the goods becomes unfathomable, within a process “defining worth by need” (Ibid., 1, 8). The illusory capability of consumption to respond to deep individual needs thus determines a progressive isolation of the subjects and their disconnection from the rest of society, destroying social ties instead of reproducing them.
5. *Needful Things* in anthropological perspective

The final isolation of consumers in *Needful Things* is exacerbated by sudden awareness of the dreamy atmosphere they had until then lived – the only remarkable property of Needful things being their ability to haunt the dreams of people in Castle Rock. We are offered things that are out of reach and asked about are willingness to pay them, like in a dream, while the consideration, the “deed” Gaunt requires from us, reveals the “heroic” character of the dream itself. “It is time for us to realize that we’re too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams ... We have every right to dream heroic dreams”, said Reagan in his inauguration – in the “Grand Opening Celebration” (the title of the first section of *Needful Things*) of his presidency. But the dream is a bad one, for buyers of Gaunt’s merchandise; it is a nightmare, as Brian Rusk realizes when dreaming Sandy Koufax, or better Gaunt, telling him what to do (a new “deed”, after the one that had provoked the domino effect). It is the nightmare of addiction, the one King had just escaped before writing *Needful Things* (the first book he wrote after recovering from addiction to alcohol and drugs, see Smythe 2014). Buyers become addicted, and transform into *junkies* – Gaunt sells nothing but *junk*, after all (and *Junction City* is the town where Gaunt, at the end of *Needful Things*, opens a store called “Answered Prayers”). When the shop closed, visitors “stepped back, identical expressions of frustration and distress on their faces – they looked like hurting junkies who had discovered the pusherman wasn’t where he’d promised to be. What do I do now?”.

The only freedom buyers can legitimately – in the sense of truly – aspire to, in *Needful Things*, is freedom from social relationships, as seen. Russell (1996, 128) interestingly remarks (following King himself) that “Gaunt sees himself as an electrician, cross wiring connections between people. When the wiring is finished he will turn up the voltage all the way. Gaunt does this not just out of malice; he is collecting souls like trophies. But he is also amused by what happens” (see also Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 2006). Gaunt establishes social relationships, which are however of a negative, destructive nature, presupposing no interaction exception made for the troublesome ones that follow the various “deeds” and the damages these latter cause to single individuals and, through a domino effect, to the community as a whole. This evidently reminds of King’s concern for “the lack of community and social connectedness in American society, and the culture’s general spirit of apathy” (Wagner 1988, 7), and perhaps to his general pessimism about human aggregates, as revealed
by the novel *The Stand*: “Shall I tell what sociology teaches us about the human race? I'll give it to you in a nutshell. Show me a man and a woman alone and I show you a saint. Give me two and they'll fall in love. Give me three and they'll invent that charming thing we call ‘society’. Give me four and they'll build a pyramid. Give me five and they'll make one an outcast. Give me six and they'll reinvent prejudice. Give me seven and in seven years they'll reinvent warfare. Man may have been made in the image of God, but human society was made in the image of His opposite number, and is always trying to get back home” (King 1979, 253). Still, the remarkable feature of this dynamic is that a proclaimed market relationship (“I believe in free trade ... It’s what made this country great”, says Gaunt; King 1991, 4, 9) gives life to an obligation – by which individuals destroy social relationships – that cannot be escaped. But “to owe nothing to anyone, to be able to walk away from a social bond and discharge an obligation just as you change tradesman when you're not satisfied – this capacity for exit, analysed by Hirschman [1970], is the defining feature of modern freedom as embodied in the market and echoed by the welfare state” (Godbout and Caillé 1998, 63). The typical option you use in (and thanks to) the market, exit, is simply not available. “You can keep going ... or you can stay where you are and get buried”, says Gaunt to Brian Rusk in this latter's dream.

Brian’s dream is one of the key passages in the book, perhaps the most important one. At least, this is what the reading of *Needful Things* through the lens provided by anthropologist Mark Anspach’s (2002, 2017) reflections on reciprocity induces to believe. *Needful things* is the story of an escalatory, vengeance-fuelled spiral of violence that gradually destroys a community; its originality, as seen, lies in the motives that entrap Castle Rock into it – faith, as we defined it in the previous section, in the illusory capability of consumption to respond to deep individual needs. Obviously remindful of the concept of commodity fetishism, by means of which Marx throws light on the tendency to consider the value of a commodity as intrinsic, without paying regard to the social relationships involved in its production, “needful things” replace social relationships, they are a substitute for social ties. If they manage to free Castle Rock people from social ties, it is because, being identity goods, they are a surrogate of social relationships otherwise living in the “primary sociality” milieu (its areas being marriage, kinship, partnership, friendship, and so on), or in any case of personal connections to the larger social group represented by the Castle Rock community. Characters in *Needful Things* are defined, as said, by their needful things – that is, “needful things” suffice to define the members of the community.
According to Anspach, vengeance and gift exchange are manifestations of identical but opposite logics. Vengeance is the infliction of harm or humiliation on someone by someone else who has been harmed by that person; you harm someone because s/he has previously harmed you, or you kill someone who (because s/he) has previously killed somebody. But s/he who kills in revenge becomes the next victim. Vengeance is aimed at destroying the murderer, but in so doing, it produces another – the balance is never restored. The only possibility to stop this vicious circle, writes Anspach, is by reversing the logic of vengeance (and the temporal orientation, from the past to the future, of the action) through gift exchange. By giving, one always gives himself, in some sense (in any case, s/he self-imposes a veritable cost), to fulfil the other’s desires even before this latter can express them – one gives to another who will give in its turn. The reference is here to The Gift, Marcel Mauss’ (1990[1923-4]) pioneering study on the moral and political foundations of primitive societies, and subsequent works in the substantivist tradition (from Sahlins 1972 to the M.A.U.S.S. group, Godbout and Caillé 1998 in primis; see Marchionatti and Cedrini 2017). As Caillé (1998) shows, “unconditional” gifts, that is, gifts that are voluntarily offered, without guarantee of return, play a fundamental role in creating and sustaining social bonds and alliances between partners previously regarding each other as potential enemies.

Still, to motivate both violent (negative) reciprocity and non-violent (positive) reciprocity, that is revenge and its antithesis, gift exchange (in Mauss’ famous terms, the obligation to reciprocate), is the transcendence of the relation. Individuals can (it is the case of gift exchange) observe and recognise the “relation” for what it is – the meta-level between individuals themselves and the society, the loci where the two dimensions interact, which is in truth self-transcendent – or simply fail to do so (as in the case of vengeance), feeling compelled to act as if their action were dictated by an external force, which they usually reify by transforming it, for instance, into God. It is by taking distance, first, through reification of the relation, from the relation itself, that individuals can gain the room for manoeuvre that is required for turning negative into positive reciprocity.

In Needful Things, Gaunt act as the “third part” symbolizing the self-transcendence of this meta-level between the individual and the society. But social relationships, in the Castle Rock community, are literally destroyed by Gaunt’s “curio shop”. This latter represents individuals’ inclinations towards deep-desire, identity goods that, ultimately, embody their withdrawal
from society itself. The active destruction of social ties is a logical consequence. Gaunt wants his customers to experience, and suffer from, a feeling of imprisonment, an all-powerful external (third) authority imposing itself on the will of people living in Castle Rock.

The only veritable reference, in the book, to the social dimension is in Brian’s dream. “What if I say no [to playing other tricks, in exchange for the Koufax baseball card], anyway?”, asks Brian, who then realizes that the Castle Rock community was there, looking at him: “Brian looked around and was horrified to see that Ebbets Field was so full they were standing in the aisles ... and he knew them all. He saw his Ma and Pa sitting with his little brother, Sean, in the Commissioner’s Box behind home plate. His speech therapy class, flanked by Miss Ratcliffe on one end and her big dumb boyfriend, Lester Pratt, on the other, was ranged along the first-base line, drinking Royal Crown Cola and munching hotdogs. The entire Castle Rock Sheriff’s Office was seated in the bleachers, drinking beer from paper cups with pictures of this year’s Miss Rheingold contestants on them. He saw his Sunday School class, the town selectmen, Myra and Chuck Evans, his aunts, his uncles, his cousins”. What horrifies Brian, in Gaunt’s words, is that “everybody in Castle Rock [would come to] know you were the one who started the avalanche” (King 1991, 9, 7). After discovering the rules of the game (this is what Gaunt “knows best”), Brian commits suicide, having realized that the baseball card he had bought was not the one he wanted, but the one Gaunt had given him (junk, therefore). And Brian is he who, this way, indirectly helps Sheriff Alan Pangborn to defeat Gaunt.

To continue with Anspach’s theory about vengeance and gift exchange, it is to be noted that while King describes the shop as a symbol of the fact that “in the eighties, everything had come with a price tag”, “nothing is priced” in Gaunt’s Needful Things. In a monetary economy of production, to say it à la Keynes, markets cannot work properly if money does not provide the functions we expect from it. Markets can truly free men from social ties, to come back to the main point in hand, in the absence of shared trust in the use of it as medium of exchange and reliable store of value. It is money, in a neoliberal perspective, to represent the self-transcendence of society, the “third part” that makes market transactions possible. But money, in bargains with Gaunt, tends to disappear, like in disappearing coin tricks. ”Turn out your pockets. Right here, on top of this case”, says Gaunt to Hugh Priest in Needful Things. “Hugh turned out his pockets. He put his pocket-knife, a roll of Certs, his Zippo lighter, and about a dollar-fifty in tobacco sprinkled change on top of the case. The coins clicked on the
glass. The man bent forward and studied the pile. "That looks about right," he remarked, and brushed the feather-duster over the meagre collection. When he removed it again, the knife, the lighter, and the Certs were still there. The coins were gone" (King 1991, 3, 7).

Trust is fundamental. Oppressed by arthritis, Polly Chalmers finds in the shop a pain-relief device, and Gaunt almost succeeds in convincing her that her boyfriend Alan Pangborn had made inquiries into her (troubled) past, so as to make her question Alan’s love for her. When she realizes (helped by a mental conversation with her auntie) that Gaunt had tricked her, she manages to persuade Alan that Gaunt had tricked him too (making him watching a false videotape of the accident in which both his wife and son had died, for which he had always blamed himself). As Russell (1996, 133) puts it, if Polly succeeds in making Alan understand the logic of Gaunt’s tricks, it is because of the force of their “lasting relationship based on trust”. Mauss (1990, 82-83), again: “Societies have progressed in so far as they themselves, their subgroups, and lastly the individuals in them, have succeeded in stabilizing relationships, giving, receiving, and finally, giving in return. To trade, the first condition was to be able to lay aside the spear ... Only then did people learn how to create mutual interests, giving mutual satisfaction, and, in the end, to defend them without having to resort to arms. Thus the clan, the tribe, and peoples have learnt how to oppose and to give to one another without sacrificing themselves to one another”.

Only Polly and Alan have succeeded in stabilizing relationships, and to lay aside the spear. Whereas Castle Rock, where Gaunt finally distributes weapons, plunges into a Hobbesian war of all against all. “He had begun business many years ago-as a wandering peddler on the blind face of a distant land, a peddler who carried his wares on his back, a peddler who usually came at the fall of darkness and was always gone the next morning, leaving bloodshed, horror, and unhappiness behind him. Years later, in Europe, as the Plague raged and the deadcarts rolled, he had gone from town to town and country to country in a wagon drawn by a slat-thin white horse with terrible burning eyes and a tongue as black as a killer’s heart. He had sold his wares from the back of the wagon ... and was gone before his customers, who paid with small, ragged coins or even in barter, could discover what they had really bought. Times changed; methods changed; faces, too. But when the faces were needful they were always the same, the faces of sheep who have lost their shepherd, and it was with this sort of commerce that he felt most at home, most like that wandering peddler of old, standing not behind a fancy counter with a
Sweda cash register nearby but behind a plain wooden table, making change out of a cigar-box and selling them the same item over and over and over again. The goods which had so attracted the residents of Castle Rock the black pearls, the holy relics, the carnival glass, the pipes, the old comic books, the baseball cards, the antique kaleidoscopes were all gone. Mr. Gaunt had gotten down to his real business, and at the end of things, the real business was always the same. The ultimate item had changed with the years, just like everything else, but such changes were surface things, frosting of different flavors on the same dark and bitter cake. At the end, Mr. Gaunt always sold them weapons ... and they always bought”.

References


